

The book of Esther

Introduction: The topic of why God's allows evil is addressed by both secular and Biblical authors. John Blanchard highlights the following.

The **secular** conclusion is based on these four arguments:

1. Evil and suffering exist in the world.
2. If God were all-powerful, He **could** prevent evil and suffering.
3. If God were all-loving, He would **want** to prevent evil and suffering.
4. Therefore, since evil and suffering still exist in the world, either God is not powerful enough to stop it, not loving enough to stop it, or He merely doesn't exist.

The **Biblical** conclusion is based on these three truths:

- God is both all-powerful and all-loving. He is the God of gods and the Lord of lords, mighty and awesome (Deut. 10:17).
- He works all things to the conformity of His will (Eph. 1:11).
- He is compassionate, gracious, and abounding in love (Ps. 103:8).

Pastor Stephen Davey reminds us of the two categories of evil in our world.

1. **Moral evil**—Under this category fall murder, rape, theft, political oppression, physical abuse, sex trafficking, terrorist attacks, genocide, and poverty due to corruption, among other things.
2. **Natural evil**—This is identified by theologians as diseases and epidemics, brutality in the animal kingdom, and disasters caused by forces of nature that ravish entire nations, causing drought and famine.

We are indebted to David Dorsey's outline for understanding the overall structure of the book.

1) Background to the book of Esther

- a) The events in the book of Esther take place about 55 to 65 years after the Babylonian exile of the Jewish people had ended. The story is set in Susa//Shushan, the primary capital of the Persian Empire during the reign of Ahasuerus. Chronologically, this places it in the middle of the book of Ezra—after the second temple in Jerusalem was dedicated in 516 BC, but prior to Ezra leading a group of exiles to Jerusalem (in 458 BC). (FSB)
 - i) The Persian Empire lasted from 538-332 BC.
 - ii) Ahasuerus (his Hebrew title, not his name; Xerxes in Greek) reigned from 486-465 BC. He was the son of Darius I who is mentioned in Ezra and Nehemiah (Ezra 4:5; Neh. 12:22) and grandson of Cyrus (Ezra 6:14; Is. 45:1). He was a successful military leader.

- iii) The events in the book appear to take place in 483-473 BC. Compare Esther 1:3; 2:16; and 3:7. (BKC)
- iv) The appears to have been written during the latter years of the reign of Ahasuerus (cf. 10:2-3) or perhaps during the reign of his son Artaxerxes (464-424 BC). (BKC)
- v) Susa//Shushan is @ 150 miles of the Persian Gulf in modern southwest Iran. It is approximately 200 miles east of Babylon.
 - (1) Daniel saw a vision here (Dan. 8).
 - (2) Nehemiah began his public life here (Neh. 1).
- vi) The Jews (grandchildren of those who went into Exile) have been Persianized (Davey). They have adopted their foreign culture as “the new normal”.
- b) The book does not contain any name or title for God.
 - i) Consider this in light of passages like Deut. 31:17 or Isaiah 59:2.
 - ii) It does, however, contain the name of a Babylonian false god, Marduk//Merodach (Mordecai means “servant of Marduk”).
- c) The book contains several Persian loan-words. There are about 60 Persian words in the book’s 165 verses.
- d) The book is part of the third division (Ketubim/Writings) of the Hebrew Old Testament, being part of the Scrolls subdivision.
- e) There are no NT quotes from the book of Esther.
 - i) A possible allusion (indirect reference, echo) is Mark 6:21-29 compared with the Greek text (LXX) of Esther.
 - King’s celebration, a scheme to kill, a young woman to entertain, the young woman is called a *korasion* (Esth. 2:7; Mark 6:22, 28), the entertainment pleased the king (Esth. 2:4; Mark 6:22), the offer of “up to half the kingdom” (Esth. 5:6; 7:2; Mark 6:23)
 - ii) Another possible allusion is John 21:15-17.
 - (1) The phrase, “Lord, you know all things...” is found in the LXX version of Esth. 4:17 and 8:15
 - iii) Esther (Mordecai’s cousin and foster daughter) was previously called by the Hebrew name Hadassah (Esth. 2:7), meaning “myrtle.”
 - (1) Esther’s name is similar to the Hebrew word *astir* (I will hide) in Deut. 31:18 and Ezek. 39:23-24.
- f) Not everyone finds Esther helpful.
 - i) Martin Luther wrote, “I am so hostile to this book [2 Maccabees] and to Esther that I would wish they did not exist at all; for they judaize too greatly and have much pagan impropriety.” (Table Talk)
- g) Throughout the centuries the public reading of this book at Purim has kept alive nationalistic expectations. Even today, every time Haman’s name is mentioned in the Purim liturgy congregations respond with loud banging, shouting and stamping of feet, and ‘Haman’s hats’ (triangular cakes) are eaten during the celebrations. Not surprisingly the story of Esther is better known to the ordinary Jew than any other part of the Old Testament. (NBC)

2) Significant ideas to look for in Esther

- The book of Esther is a strange, complex, and wonderful work of literature. (Tomasino)
- a) Banquet—Esther contains 19 of 46 uses of the OT word for “drinking occasion.” There are 11 different banquets mentioned in Esther (1:3-4, 5-8, 9; 2:18; 3:15; 5:4-8; 6:14-7:8; 8:17; 9:17, 18, 22-23).
- b) King/sovereignty/reign/realm/royal—used over 250x in 167 verses.
- c) Assertiveness/submissiveness—for both men and women characters
- d) Reversal/irony—for both Haman and Mordecai
 - i) Note that Mordecai was of the tribe of Benjamin (2:5), while Haman was an Amalekite (3:1).

3) Some difficulties while looking at the book of Esther

- a) It is not always easy for us to see the hand of God at work.
 - i) In this text, we are skillfully directed to contemplate a God who is committed to His people, even when they show little interest in Him. The characters here display little of the pervasive piety typical of biblical heroes; indeed, they are much more like modern people than we may care to admit. Just as we typically do not recognize the providence of God even as we experience it, so, too, do the characters in Esther seem mostly oblivious to the hand that is guiding their fate, making only oblique references to His purposes. (Tomasino)
- b) We may not always see the culmination of all of God’s promises and commands.
 - i) Haman the Agagite’s violent death takes place @ 600 years (time of Saul to Esther) after the command to destroy the Amalekites.

4) The purposes of the book of Esther

- a) Primary
 - i) Most conservative scholars conclude that the purpose of Esther is to highlight the *providence* of God, that is, God’s sovereign ability to provide for His people. (Moody)
 - (1) God is not dead nor is He absent. He is very much alive and present among His people. (Tomasino)
 - ii) [It] becomes apparent that the goal, of the book is to express His *faithfulness*—all the more so, since the benefactors of His faithfulness, Israel, are in the land of their exile on account of their sins. (Moody)
 - (1) Will God keep His promises to bless Abraham and his descendants? (Gen. 12:1-3)
 - (2) Will God keep His promises to curse those who dishonor Abraham and his descendants? (Exod. 17:14; Deut. 25:19; 1 Sam. 15; etc.)
 - iii) The perfect God sovereignly works through imperfect people to accomplish His perfect plan for His people. (Ps. 115:2-3)
- b) Secondary

- i) The Book of Esther tells the story of how the Jewish Feast of Purim was instituted (celebrated in February or March each year).
- ii) The Book of Esther was written to encourage the returned Jewish exiles by reminding them of the faithfulness of God who would keep His promises to the nation. (BKC)
- iii) The book of Esther reveals what God can accomplish through an imperfect man and woman of courage.
 - (1) There is a significant failure of compromise by the Jews in Exile to maintain their Jewish distinctiveness.

5) The value of the book of Esther for us today (NAC)

- a) Reveals the providence of God.
- b) Reveals the strong conflict of differing worldviews.
- c) Reveals the examples of obedience.
- d) Reveals the dangers of anti-Semitism.

The Book of Esther (outline by David Dorsey)

- a **king's proud feast** (1:1–22)
 - king *deposes Queen Vashti*
 - *letters sent* throughout empire
- b **Esther becomes queen** (2:1–18)
 - king gives *feast in her honor*
 - *gives gifts*
- c **king's life is saved** (2:19–23)
 - those *plotting to kill* the king *are killed*
- d **Haman's plot:** Haman convinces king to send royal edict to kill Jews on Adar 13 (3:1–4:3)
 - Haman to destroy: “if it please the king, let it be written”
 - *destroy, kill, and annihilate* Jews; *plunder their goods*
 - edict in all languages, sealed with king's signet, sent by couriers
 - ends: Susa distressed at edict; Mordecai dresses in sackcloth
- e **Mordecai learns of Haman's plot** and money involved; appeals to Esther to risk all to stop Haman (4:4–17)
- f **Esther invites king and Haman** to her *first banquet* (5:1–14)
 - *Haman builds gallows* to hang Mordecai
 - *king asks Esther*: “What is your petition?”
 - “it will be given you, even *up to half my kingdom*”
- g **TURNING POINT: Haman's fortunes turn;** he honors Mordecai the Jew! (6:1–14)
- f' **Esther invites king and Haman** to *second banquet* (7:1–10)
 - *Haman hanged on gallows* he built for Mordecai
 - *king asks Esther*: “What is your petition?”
 - “it will be given you, even *up to half my kingdom*”
- e' **Mordecai and Esther given Haman's estate** (8:1–2)*
- d' **Haman's plot foiled:** Esther convinces king to send second royal edict to allow Jews to kill enemies on Adar 13 (8:3–17)
 - Esther to king: “if it please the king ... let it be written”
 - *destroy, kill, and annihilate* enemies: *plunder their goods*
 - edict in all languages, sealed with king's signet, sent by couriers
 - ends: Susa rejoices at edict; Mordecai dresses royally; joy
- c' **Jews' lives are saved** (9:1–10)
 - those *plotting to kill* Jews *are killed*
- b' **Esther wins second day for Jews in Susa** (9:11–19)
 - another *feast day* instituted because of Esther (*annual feast will perpetually honor Esther!*)
 - *giving of gifts*
- a' **Jews' Feast of Purim** (9:20–10:3)
 - king *promotes Mordecai*
 - *letters sent* throughout empire

Haman's evil plot hatched (Esther 1–6) (Dorsey)

- a **Queen Vashti deposed** (1:1–22)
 - king asks advice from advisors: *what ought to be done* to disobedient queen?
 - advisors *give king advice*, which he follows
 - *example made* of queen: here is what happens to a disrespectful woman!
- b **Esther goes to king** (2:1–18)
 - he is *pleased* and makes her his new queen
 - king gives Esther a *banquet* (*mišteh*)
- c **Mordecai learns of plot to kill king** and contacts Esther so she will tell king (2:19–23)
- d **CENTER: Haman's plot** (3:1–15)
- c' **Mordecai learns of plot to kill Jews** and contacts Esther so she will appeal to king (4:1–17)
- b' **Esther goes to king** (5:1–14)
 - he is *pleased* and asks her request
 - Esther gives king a *banquet* (*mišteh*)
- a' **Mordecai honored** (6:1–14)
 - king asks advice from Haman: *what ought to be done* to someone the king wishes to honor?
 - Haman *gives king advice*, which he follows (tc Haman's chagrin!)
 - *example made* of Mordecai: here is what happens to a man the king wishes to honor!

Haman's evil plot foiled (Esther 6–10) (Dorsey)

- a **Mordecai is honored** (6:1–14)
 - begins: king reads the *royal records* about *Mordecai's deeds*
- b **king asks Esther for her request** on *second day*, at her second banquet (7:1–10)
 - *Esther requests* that Jews not be killed
 - result: *Haman hanged*
- c **Mordecai's new prominence in palace** (8:1–2)
 - he is given king's signet ring and appointed over Haman's estate
 - all that was supposed to be Haman's (including king's signet ring used in plot to kill Jews) is given to a Jew
- d **CENTER: Haman's plot foiled** (8:3–17)
- c' **Mordecai's new prominence in the palace** (9:1–10)
 - Jews kill those intending to kill them
 - all that was supposed to be done to Jews by their enemies, the Jews do to them
- b' **king asks Esther for her request; Esther's request** for *second day* (9:11–19)
 - *Esther requests* that Jews be allowed to kill enemies one more day
 - result: bodies of *Haman's sons are hanged* and second day of Purim banquet
- a' **Mordecai is honored, promoted to be second to the king** (9:20–10:3)
 - ends: statement that *Mordecai's deeds* are recorded in *royal records*

